

One of the our five honor roll teachers, Donna Barrick from Houston Elementary in Spartanburg 7, shared the following story in her application for Teacher of the Year:

Over 100 years ago, a great Russian philosopher and novelist (*Count Leo Tolstoy*) wrote a short story titled *The Three Questions*. Acclaimed writer Jon Muth tells a children's version of that story in a contemporary book by the same name.

The main character is a young boy named Nikolai, whose only desire is to be a good person. Nikolai isn't always sure if he's doing the right thing. He thought if he could only find the answers to three questions, he would always know what to do.

He yearns to know: *When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?*

In his search for answers, Nikolai seeks advice from his animal friends — a heron, a monkey, and a dog. He's not satisfied with their responses, so he visits another friend Leo, a wise turtle, who lives high up in the mountains.

Several events occur during the next twenty-four hours, leaving Nikolai tired and disappointed. So he asks Leo the same questions one more time. *When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?*

The old turtle looks Nikolai squarely in the eyes and says, *"But your questions have been answered. Remember there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing by your side. For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in this world."*

This morning, I am honored to stand among America's finest school principals and administrators. I am humbled to be your leader. I am grateful that the lesson that the turtle taught Nikolai is one that you have known all along.

And because of your contributions, I am very proud and encouraged about where South Carolina's schools are headed:

A. PACT – Increases across all grades, subjects, demographic groups.

*(CHART 1 – Third-grade ELA, % Basic or Above)*

*(CHART 2 – Sixth-grade MATH, % Basic or Above)*

B. Decreasing number of Unsatisfactory-rated schools

*(CHART – Unsat schools drop from 73 to 22)*

C. Improvement in percentage of schools making AYP under NCLB

D. NAEP tests required by NCLB – Only valid comparison of states, and South Carolina's nowhere near the bottom.

*(CHART 1 – NAEP Reading Grade 4, all states) “36<sup>th</sup> in the nation”*

*(CHART 2 – NAEP Reading Grade 8, all states) “38<sup>th</sup> in the nation”*

*(CHART 3 – NAEP Math Grade 4, all states) “top ½ of states”*

*(CHART 4 – NAEP Math Grade 8, all states) “top 2/3 of states”*

*(CHART 5 – Three studies show SC as a national leader on NAEP)*

*(CHART 6 – EdTrust: States with largest Math gains for eighth-graders over last three years)*

*(CHART 7 – EdTrust: States with largest Math gains for African-American eighth-graders over last three years)*

*(CHART 8 – EdTrust: States with largest Math gains for low-income eighth-graders over last three years) “#1”*

E. TIMSS – At the international average

F. Terra Nova – At the national average

G. Academic standards – Ranked by six different studies as among the toughest in the nation

*(CHART – Six organizations that conducted studies)*

H. SAT

*(CHART – 32-point SAT gain over last six years)*

I. National Board-certified teachers

*(CHART – Increasing numbers of NBPTS teachers)*

J. Improving teacher quality

*(CHART – “Quality Counts” rankings for last three years)*

As you can see, what South Carolina has accomplished in education over the past five years is nothing short of remarkable. 2005 was another very good year, bringing many other noteworthy accomplishments.

This year, for example, the General Assembly fully funded the Base Student Cost for the first time in five years – which is all by itself a cause for celebration. Substantial funding was added for a number of pressing needs, including textbooks, summer school programs, and teacher salaries. Their budget isn’t perfect – we would like to have seen School Resource Officers fully funded as in the past, for example -- but after several years of belt-tightening, I think it gives us the resources we need to keep moving ahead.

We also passed one of the most important pieces of legislation in recent years, the Education and Economic Development Act. That legislation will enable us to prepare students better for post-secondary education and productive careers, by customizing high school coursework to individual career interests, adding substantially to guidance and counseling services, and creating alternatives for students at risk of dropping out.

We passed the Students Health and Fitness Act based on the work of the Department's Nutrition Task Force, giving us a renewed focus on physical activity and well-rounded nutrition in our schools, to help combat obesity, reduce medical costs and ultimately help students perform better in school.

And perhaps most important of all – we defeated the private school voucher bill known as “Put Parents In Charge.”

Everyone here today should understand one central thing about the defeat of Governor Sanford's voucher bill. It was not defeated because it was unaccountable, unproven, and unaffordable -- although every shred of research proves that it was all of those things. It was also not defeated because everything is perfect in public education, and no one wants any improvements. We all know that isn't true.

This legislation was defeated, instead, for one simple reason: because the people of South Carolina still believe in public education. They know what the anti-school activists won't acknowledge: We in public education are doing the best work we have ever done. We are defeating deprivation, poverty, and decades of under-education in greater measure than ever before in the history of our state. We are making phenomenal progress. We are making a real and measurable difference in the lives of millions of South Carolinians and in the life of our state.

And we are not done.

Over the past few years, South Carolina has put in place an academic infrastructure that I firmly believe can make our schools as great as any in

the nation. We have enviable standards. We have teacher quality programs that are ranked the best in the nation. We have world-class assessments. We have a no-holds-barred accountability system – a system that left no child and no school behind long before the federal government took an interest.

The job before us today is simple: To make that infrastructure deliver on its potential in every school and every district in our state.

How are we going to get there?

One of the challenges that South Carolina *must* address is equity funding.

Providing every child in South Carolina with equitable access to opportunity is not just a matter of basic fairness. Nor is it simply a matter of compassion for the thousands of children in our state who begin life with disadvantages most of us here today can't even imagine -- though these are enough in themselves to justify immediate change.

Rather, providing an adequate education to all children regardless of race, income, geographic location is vital to the continued prosperity of our entire state. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said when he noted that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Consider just a few facts about the 8 South Carolina school districts involved in the equity funding lawsuit against the General Assembly – facts that are all too familiar to many of you in this room, but that affect the rest of us as well in hundreds of ways.

- The plaintiff districts are overwhelmingly minority – 88.4 percent minority on average, compared with a statewide average of 48 percent.
- They are overwhelmingly, devastatingly poor. The poverty index in the 8 plaintiff districts is nearly 90 percent, compared with 60 percent

for other districts. 86 percent of students in the plaintiff districts qualify for free or reduced price lunch, compared with 55 for the state as a whole.

- Plaintiff districts lack the funding to attract and keep qualified teachers. In these districts, there are significantly fewer teachers with advanced degrees. More teachers with substandard certificates and out-of-field permits. Fewer teachers on continuing contracts, and fewer who stay from one year to the next.
- Plaintiff districts educate children without even a basic infrastructure – adequate buildings. They lack decent classrooms, equipped labs, libraries, and cafeterias. In fact, some have little more than walls and a roof.

The result of all this is what anyone might expect: vastly higher percentages of students scoring below basic on PACT. Seventy-five (75) percent of schools scoring Unsatisfactory or Below Average on the state report card, compared with 17.4 percent of schools statewide. High school completion rates well below the statewide average.

We have the power to change these dismal statistics. We know the things that would help erase the learning deficit in South Carolina's poorest districts – things like quality early childhood education programs for all children, year-round schools, competitive teacher salaries – not to mention safe, decent buildings.

Sometime over the next few months, the court will issue its opinion in the equity lawsuit. I was proud to support the plaintiff districts in their suit, and I am very hopeful that the court will instruct the General Assembly to provide some fair and equitable remedy. In the meantime, keeping the cause of equity funding before the General Assembly, and pushing for ways to help support the districts that need our help the most, will continue to be one of my most important priorities.

Quality early childhood education is another area that I passionately believe South Carolina must finally address.

All of us here today understand the vicious cycle of poverty and under-education. Every day you work with the thousands of children who come to school so heartbreakingly unprepared that our hardest work and our best efforts can't close the gap.

But we also know what it takes to break that cycle: early and effective intervention.

Thousands of disadvantaged children in South Carolina could benefit from high quality four-year-old programs, but the budget cuts of recent years have meant they aren't being served. We need the funding to reach every child. We need funding for training programs that reach all early childhood providers: those in public schools, those in HeadStart programs, those who work in private child care settings. And we need the funding to provide family literacy services for parents and guardians, so families can learn how to get their own children ready for school.

A third pressing challenge lies at the other end of the K-12 experience: preparing our high school students better for college, work, and citizenship.

Earlier this year, in the keynote address to the National Governors Association, Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates gave a blunt assessment of the state of America's high schools.

They are, he told the Governors, "obsolete." "By 'obsolete,' I don't just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed, and under-funded – though a case could be made for every one of those points. By obsolete, I mean that our high schools – *even when they're working exactly as designed* – cannot teach our kids what they need to know today.

It is difficult to overstate the risk to America of high schools failing to prepare students well for college and career. In his new book *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman warns that today's technological advances don't just reduce but completely eliminate obstacles to international competition, flattening the international playing field. Countries like India and China – graduating millions more students from college than we do

every year -- are preparing to compete for work like never before. And America isn't ready.

Unfortunately, there is no national consensus on what tomorrow's high school experience should look like, and South Carolina cannot afford to wait. That's why I formed the South Carolina High School Redesign Commission, co-chaired by Mack Whittle, CEO of Carolina First Bank and President of the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce.

The Redesign Commission's 32 members -- including business leaders and educators from every corner of South Carolina -- will focus on recommending high school design changes that support what Gates calls the three R's. The first R is for Rigor. Since tomorrow's economy will no longer be based on unskilled labor but will require more advanced education, the existing high school system must be changed so that all students, not just a select group, take rigorous coursework that prepares them for college or work. The second R is Relevance: making sure students have courses and projects that clearly relate to their lives and their goals. The third R is Relationships: making sure students have a number of adults who know them, look out for them, and push them to achieve.

South Carolina has made good progress toward these goals with passage of the Education and Economic Development Act. I am excited about the work of the High School Redesign Commission and about the opportunity to build on the progress we've made -- so that all our students leave high school well prepared for a flat and intensively competitive world.



Gangs, drugs, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, truancy: all these interwoven societal problems make up one of the greatest challenges you face in our schools each day -- and one of the greatest conundrums for school leaders everywhere. We are caught in a difficult place. On one hand, keeping students safe in school....creating classroom environments where children can learn, and learn well...is always our most important priority. On the other hand is the practical and moral imperative to help troubled students – to keep them in school and off the streets, to keep the doors of opportunity open, not slam them shut.

South Carolina has done a great deal of work on all of the issues that affect our youth. I am proud of our efforts – particularly our innovative truancy prevention program. Still, these facts remain: too many of our youth end up in facilities for juvenile delinquents, not in school. We have one of the highest expulsion rates in the country, leaving too many students out of school and out of options. That situation serves no one well – not our youth, not our communities, not our state.

We need a comprehensive plan to help our at-risk youth. We need better prevention programs. We need more alternative schools with wraparound services. We need even closer cooperation with family courts, solicitors, the law enforcement community, other public agencies, and not-for-profit groups, so troubled youth get the help they need to negotiate adolescence safely and become productive and responsible adults.

The final challenge I would like to mention is everyone's favorite topic: South Carolina's SAT scores.

Over the past six years, as all of you know, South Carolina's improvement on the SAT has been nothing short of phenomenal. To raise our scores by 32 points while the nation improved only two points is a remarkable accomplishment, and I want to thank each of you personally for the hard work you have done to make it happen.

Unfortunately, as you all also know, our ranking among the states is still not what we want it to be.

Always, when the topic of SAT arises, I explain that there's no validity in using the SAT to rank and compare academic achievement. It isn't designed for that, as the College Board emphasizes every year when it releases state-by-state scores. It's an elective test: Some states test lots of students, some states test very few. And it's only one measure of many that have to be looked at together for an accurate gauge of state achievement.

In the real world, though, none of that really matters. The news media and the public DO use SAT scores to rate school quality. It's a single number, much easier to understand than more complicated scoring systems like NAEP.

So we're left with this very uncomfortable truth: Until we substantially raise our SAT scores in South Carolina and escape from the mythical "SAT basement" that our critics love to talk about, every valid achievement our schools make will be downplayed and marginalized.

The good news is, we know we can do it. If we can raise our scores by 32 points in five years....if we can raise our PACT scores literally by leaps and bounds....if we can meet and exceed national averages on tests like NAEP....then we can change our SAT reputation too.

We've done substantial work on this already. But I believe it is time for a no-holds-barred, all-out effort to move up the SAT ladder – to eliminate once and for all one of the very last negative things that those who are always looking for faults can say about our schools.

You'll be hearing a lot more about each of these topics over the next few months, as the Department finalizes and begins putting in place comprehensive plans to meet these remaining challenges. I am excited about the plans we have. I look forward to working with each and every one of you to build even more on the remarkable progress we are making in our schools.

I read once that "to be a leader in a school committed to innovation is to walk a tightrope between collaboration and supervision, between faculty

and community, between inspiration and perspiration.” This morning, I salute each of you for doing that.

South Carolina is making remarkable progress because of you. Because you and those you lead have put aside reservations about accountability and worked overtime – district by district, school by school, and classroom by classroom -- to do what the General Assembly and the citizens of South Carolina have asked. I have never been more proud of you, and I have never been prouder to call myself a South Carolina educator.

As we look toward the new school year, I challenge you to never stop believing that your work is important.

Someone once said, "Life affords no greater responsibility, no greater privilege, than the raising of the next generation." There *is* no greater cause. There *is* no greater calling than to educate.

*What is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?*

The time is now. All 699,733 of our students are the most important. And the right thing to do is to remember something Jane Pulling of Marion District 7 said, “What happens to the least of us, happens to all of us.”

The fate of our students and the fate of our South Carolina are one in the same. Continuing to do right by both of them is our responsibility. It is our privilege. It is our honor.

Thank you.